



TRIUMPH TRANSCENDING VICTIMHOOD: PORTRAYAL OF 'DRAUPADI' IN CHITRA BANNERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Draupadi is an exemplary character, despite being the victim of circumstances and patriarchal social norms that had vice like control over her destiny; she remained defiant and determined to act in her own wily way rather than being a passive player. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits the absorbing saga of Mahabharata in her work *The Palace of Illusions* to bring out the psyche of Draupadi in a more contemporary perspective. The tale here is narrated by Draupadi herself, and voice is a powerful one making her the embodiment of self will and defiance.

KEY WORDS: perspective, defiance, discrimination.

Myth making has always been an easy task as compared to demystifying such myths and assimilating them into correct and contemporary perspectives. Mahabharata is a story replete with myths and mystery. It represents a world that is real and also harbors at the brink of magical realms. Retellings of the epic Mahabharata in the recent past in Indian English are endeavors to scrutinize this vast and complex work from different perspectives in order to have a proper grasp of the range of motivations of the various characters. There have been many different renditions of the story that revisit the epic from diverse viewpoints. These retellings are attempts to reconsider the epic Mahabharata facilitating greater understanding of the epic for the modern, tech savvy and skeptic generation that are wary of myth and magic. In the recent years there has been an upsurge in such renditions of the epic Mahabharata by prominent writers across India in vernaculars as well as in English.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her seminal work *The Palace of Illusions* has revisited the epic in her own distinct way and she has brought the story of Mahabharata closer to the contemporary dialectic. Her take on Mahabharata from the point of view of Draupadi, the fire born princess, is an extraordinary work that sublimates the essence of feminist ideologies that are in constant tussle with the patriarchal mindset that does not allow a woman to have her say in important issues as social justice, politics and religion. The work is a wonderful study of the psyche of Draupadi, one of the most prominent characters in the epic Mahabharata. In this work she tries to have a close look at the motives and range of emotions of Draupadi and her defiant attitude against the male dominated society.

Draupadi is a complex character, she is no ordinary woman. She is a Yajnaseni, a fire born princess who was born alongside her brother Dhristadyumna as an unsolicited blessing to her father in a Yajna and was put into circumstances of life way beyond the ordinary to say the least. She witnessed massive upheavals in her entire life from the magical moment of being married to Arjuna in Swayamvara to have become a shared wife of all the five Pandavas and the utter humiliation in the Kaurava Assembly and finally when she is avenged and gets justice after the devastating war in which she loses all her children, her character bears no resemblance to a common place and ordinary life of a woman, so the study of a psyche and character in this novel becomes all the more important and exuberating.

Her character in the novel *The Palace of Illusions* is powerful and complex one which affects the action of the epic in major ways Divakaruni has absolved Draupadi of the charge or blame that she brought about the destruction of the third age of man. She brings Draupadi at the forefront of the action to uncover a story of the atrocities committed against women by men in those times and the novel becomes a powerful instrument to hear her defiant voice. Right from the early account of her life, we come to gather that she had a lonely childhood and felt extremely suffocated within the limits of her father's palace. She was rebellious and free. She was more interested in things that are mysterious and beyond the ordinary. She appears to be heartbroken when she learnt from her maid that her father was not expecting her as a boon from the sacred fire of the Yajna he was performing. And the prophecy of the sages who said that she will change the course of history puts her into oodles of doubt whether she has enough courage, perseverance and unbending will required to fulfill the prophecy. She was not a pampered child. Draupadi was acutely aware of the fact that her father was somewhat less indulgent and harsh towards her because he was not expecting a girl child. She could not forgive him for that initial rejection at the time of Yajna. She became obsessed with the thought that there is a definite and systemic discrimination

against women. When she was discouraged from learning scriptures, politics and warfare along with her brother because women were not supposed to learn such things she didn't accept it. She resented her tutors' declaration that women were the root of all the worlds' troubles. When she was reminded about the existing set of social prohibitions against women her outburst was a very characteristic one, it provides glimpses of her inner turmoil - "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support man... A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life."

The most significant aspect of the portrayal of Draupadi by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is perhaps the extraordinariness of the character. Draupadi accompanies her Dharmaraj to the fortune teller and all she is concerned about is whether she would be able to leave a mark on history. The fortune teller foretells the unfolding of an extraordinary saga in the future that lies ahead for her thinking of which she is both thrilled and dejected at the same time. Every such incident brings about some fascinating attribute of her character. From the major incidents of her life we can fathom the real essence of her character, Draupadi appears to be proud, hot tempered and vengeful and these three attributes of character sets her apart as she is not someone who likes seeking conformity to the existing social norms and lives her life according to her own will.

Her marriage or Swayamvara is also an affair of importance as well as turmoil foreboding the dire things that are to come to her life in the future. On the one hand she has the privilege of selecting her own husband and on the other she has apprehensions regarding who that person might be. The impossible challenge that her father had devised as a test for the future husband of Draupadi had not only made things very complex but also made it sure that only an extraordinary person like Arjuna would be her husband. She also comes to realize that her father is actually looking for an extraordinary warrior who could be his ally against Dronacharya and the Swayamvara is merely as an instrument to seek such a warrior the marriage tie is a lure to get a powerful ally. Draupadi came to conclude that love had got nothing to do with the marriages that happen and it was more a matter of convenience rather than love.

In the later years Draupadi was humiliated mercilessly in the Kaurava assembly by Karna and the Kauravas but the seed of that humiliation was shown on the day of her Swayamvara when she rejected Karna as a suitor on the basis of his low birth on the behest of Krishna. Divakaruni very delicately suggests that Draupadi's dreadful words to Karna prohibiting him from participating in the Swayamvara were actually stemmed from her concern about the wellbeing of her beloved brother Drishtadyumna, rather than from toeing the line of casteism; none the less these words, these very words came to haunt her in her later life in the Kuru assembly where the gambling match was held.

Draupadi was fascinated by the enigmatic personality of Krishna, ironically Draupadi herself was called 'Krishna' or the dark skinned. She shared some peculiar character traits with her namesake. An ornate analogy can be drawn between Draupadi's unflinching poise and balance while facing adversity and Krishna with his beatific smile and his equanimity at the times of turmoil and chaos. The friendship of Krishna perhaps served as a balance to the rebellious nature of Draupadi who had the habit of courting controversies. She was fortunate to have the persona of Lord Krishna around her in the testing times of her life, whether it is the Swayamvara or the Kuru assembly. There has never been a definite reference to the fact whether Draupadi loved Lord Krishna. Another individual that has been referred to in the same line is Karna. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi

certainly hints on more than one occasion that she might have been secretly attracted to the personality of Karna, her husband's most dangerous enemy. What are the implications of such a relationship for a woman of the stature of Draupadi? She herself is an extraordinary woman so she cannot ignore the extraordinariness in Karna. Draupadi appears to be a woman who is very complex and mysterious and her outlook in this novel is very modern and contemporary one because she is not an individual to be dictated by the society and patriarchal norms to shy away from her feelings whether she should be attracted to somebody is entirely an individual issue rather than being a social concern.

After she was won over by Arjuna she couldn't have a blissful married life with the ace archer because of the arrangement suggested by Kunti, her mother in law that she would be the shared wife of all the Pandavas. She found herself helpless and could not avoid her predicament. She fiercely resented her mother in law and she was too much of an egotist to hold her resentments to herself. The novel provides ample examples of the power tussle between Kunti and Draupadi. Despite having suffered the nagging discomforts of life in the forest she doesn't let it show; she remains rather stoic in her suffering. She was also acutely aware of the fact that despite her beauty and finesse she was not the only wife of her husbands, her husband's took more wives and she had to cope with those tricky situations. Her perspective brings about the sorry fact that women hating each other or trying to compete over a man's attention are equal sufferers; they are just pawns at the receiving end of the callous treatment of men in the society.

Draupadi's Saga is not complete without the mention of the disrobing episode in the Kaurava assembly. She was humiliated by the Kauravas and Karna in the presence of the elders of the Kaurava assembly like Bhishma, Dronacharya and Kripacharya. She was dragged mercilessly and her modesty was ravaged by Dushasana trying to pull her robe off her body. Her helplessness, anger, and immeasurable agony was evident but she at that moment of pain chose to summon all her will and thought about Lord Krishna to save her. When she was brought in the assembly by Dushasana she raised a question regarding the legitimacy of Yudhishtira putting his wife at stake in the game of dice. The question whether he could stake his wife in the game or not when he has already lost everything is a rhetorical one and no one including Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, Dronacharya and the ilk was brave enough to have answered, but the fact remains that Draupadi could question the very foundation of patriarchal society. And after the heinous act was committed by Dushasana at the behest of his elder brother, she cursed the entire Kuru clan of destruction –“All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work...” She wanted retribution for such a vile act committed against her but she also realized bitterly that although all her husbands loved her dearly, they also loved notions of honor, and reputation more than her suffering.

At the end of the novel Draupadi's final journey in the Himalayas and her subsequent death has been mentioned poetically where Divakaruni gives Draupadi her real character buoyant, expansive and uncontainable. Be it the palace at Indraprastha, the humble hut into the deep forest, she is at home and conducts herself in a manner only suitable for an extraordinary woman like her. One must not forget that Draupadi might have been guilt ridden for being the cause for the loss of millions of lives in the war, for being secretly infatuated with Krishna and Karna, for being more inclined towards Arjuna than the other four husbands but these instances merely prove that she was a true woman who had her own set of strengths and weaknesses.

The portrayal of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* becomes all the more relevant when we put the incidents into right perspective, although the retelling of the story is contemporary one it talks about a time when women's opinion didn't matter in the general scheme of things. Ironically, these women in the times of Mahabharata were playing in others' hands; their ecstasies and agonies were largely determined by men to whom they belonged. Actions and decisions taken by men determined their fate and they could do nothing but to suffer silently.

Draupadi stands out among the other women characters in the Mahabharata by the sheer dint of her will that never allowed her to surrender to the situations. Her triumph lies in the fact that she refused to cower down against adversity. Most of the circumstances whether it is her unnatural birth, turbulent marriage, disrobing incident in the Kuru assembly or any other event in her life, her destiny never allowed her intent or will to prevail; but she didn't complain, she made the most of what she got in life. Her voice becomes a powerful plea for the future generations of women who would find themselves the characters enacting the same drama albeit with a different name, in a different time. Draupadi remains invincible and the questions she asked were not merely cold rhetoric, therein lie the mantras for the salvation of the women. The indomitable will and the ability to change the course of history is something that makes Draupadi the paramount of women characters of Mahabharata. One might say that she was at fault and she was responsible for the devastation and chaos brought upon the Kuru clan. They would also cite the fact that she was the first to fall and die in the final journey, her secret infatuation with Krishna and Karna would be made fun of but as far as Draupadi's integrity as a woman is concerned she remains supremely triumphant, brutally honest, unflinchingly stoic and brazenly remorseless who carried herself like a real queen in all the circumstances that life had given her.

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